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CIA chief says Karzai likely victor

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai will likely emerge as the winner of recent elections even after fraudulent votes are discarded, the head of the CIA said in an interview aired Friday.

"I think that what appears to be the case is that even after they eliminate some of the votes that resulted because of fraud, that Karzai... still looks like the individual who is going to win that election," Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta told US-funded broadcaster Voice of America.

"It's clear that there was some degree of corruption and fraud involved in the election," Panetta said. "It's being viewed now by commissions involved in counting those votes."

A CIA spokesman later stressed that Panetta was predicting the eventual outcome of the political deadlock, not expressing a preference or taking a position on whether Karzai fairly won the first round.

"He didn't confirm the results of the Afghan election. He talked in terms of the likelihood of a particular outcome," CIA spokesman George Little said.

"Any suggestion that he made a final call is wrong," he said.

Preliminary results give Karzai 54.6 percent of the vote in Afghanistan's second-ever presidential election, beyond the threshold needed to avoid a run-off.

But European Union observers said nearly one quarter of the votes could be fraudulent, with most of them cast for Karzai.

President Barack Obama's administration has urged a full count of all the votes and warned the political uncertainties were complicating its decision whether to send more troops to fight Taliban extremists.